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ABSTRACT

Only in the last few years have researchers in the United Kingdom focused their attention upon improving "failing" or "ineffective" schools. While there is much contemporary interest in schools in difficulty, few research studies have focused exclusively upon leadership practices and approaches. This study's prime aim was to contribute to the knowledge base about such practices within difficult school contexts by exploring effective leadership in a group of secondary schools in challenging circumstances. Ten schools were selected for study within a range of socioeconomic and cultural situations (inner city, urban, rural, and single and mixed ethnicity) and on demonstration of improvement in performance. Key characteristics and features of the leadership approaches adopted are highlighted. It is argued that the headteachers in the study operated a shared or distributed model of leadership. The empirical evidence from teachers, senior managers, pupils, and headteachers points toward a model of leadership that is fundamentally concerned with building positive relationships and empowering others to lead. The paper concludes by suggesting that a fundamental reconceptualization of leadership is required that equates leadership with the many rather than the few and recognizes the fundamental relationship between teacher leadership and school improvement. (Contains 23 references.) (RT)

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Effective Leadership in Schools facing Challenging Contexts

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Abstract

There is a great deal of contemporary interest in schools in challenging contexts. However there are relatively few research studies that have focused exclusively upon effective leadership practices in such schools. This article outlines the findings from a research study funded by the National College for School Leadership that explored effective leadership in a group of secondary schools in challenging circumstances. The article highlights the key characteristics and features of the leadership approaches adopted and argues that the heads in the study operated a shared or distributed model of leadership. The empirical evidence from teachers, senior managers, pupils and headteachers point towards a model of leadership that is fundamentally concerned with building positive relationships and empowering others to lead. The article concludes by suggesting that a fundamental re-conceptualisation of leadership is required that equates leadership with the many rather than the few and recognises the fundamental relationship between teacher leadership and school improvement.

INTRODUCTION

Effective leadership is widely accepted as being a key constituent in achieving school improvement (OfSTED, 2000). Research findings from diverse countries and different school contexts have revealed the powerful impact of leadership in securing school development and change (e.g. Van Velzen et al, 1985; Hopkins 2001a; West et al, 2000). Hopkins (2001b) highlights the centrality of transformational and instructional leadership practices in achieving school improvement in schools facing challenging circumstances (SFCC). However, the literature reveals that headteachers and principals who manage change in schools in difficult circumstances are far from uniform in their leadership styles (Hallinger and Heck, 1996; Lashway 1997). Early empirical studies of the kind of leadership practised by principals in American urban schools found that they differed greatly in the kind of leadership they provided (Blank 1987). Similarly, Keedy (1993) reported that a range of leadership styles was most effective in SFCC and that no single leadership approach worked in every situation.

In the USA, successive large-scale reform programmes have been aimed at low performing and high poverty schools (Herman and Aladjem et al. 1999). Hence a great deal of the research evidence concerning improving schools in challenging or urban contexts is derived from the American literature (e.g Elmore, 2000; Louis and Marks, 1996; Louis and Miles, 1990).

Only in the last few years have researchers in the UK focused their attention upon improving 'failing' or 'ineffective' schools (Myers and Stoll, 1998; Hopkins and Harris and Jackson, 1997;Barber and Dann, 1996; Gray, 2000;Maden and Hillman, 1996). The most recent work in this area by Reynolds (2001) and Hopkins (2001b) has firstly, synthesised the main research evidence concerning effective improvement interventions and secondly, produced a school improvement guide based upon the most successful school improvement projects and programmes.

While there is a great deal of contemporary interest in schools in difficulty, few research studies have focused exclusively upon leadership practices and approaches. Although issues of leadership inevitably feature there still remains a lack of empirical evidence concerning leadership practices in schools in difficulty. Most recently, Maden (2001) has highlighted the need for richer descriptions of leadership practices within such schools. Consequently, this research project, commissioned by the National College for School Leadership in England, focused upon leadership in schools facing challenging circumstances. Its prime aim was to contribute to the knowledge base about leadership practice within difficult school contexts.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This research project investigated leadership within a group of schools designated by the Department for Education and Skills in England (DfES) as 'facing challenging circumstances'. Schools in which 25% of pupils, or less, achieve success at external examination at 16 (i.e.five or more grades A* to C at GCSE) are placed in this category. This also includes a number of schools that achieve above 25% but where over 35% of their pupils receive free school meals. Currently there are approximately eight percent of secondary schools in England in this grouping. Many of these schools are also in the DfES categories of 'Special Measures' or 'Serious Weaknesses'[1] and are subject to regular inspection. Within the 'schools facing challenging circumstances' (SFCC) group there is a high representation of schools in low SES[2] urban areas (OFSTED 1999; OFSTED 1999) schools with falling roles and schools serving inner city communities (Gray 2000).

[1] 10.6% were in special measures at the end of summer term 2000 compared to national average of 2-3%.
[2] An average of 36% of pupils in SFCC schools are entitled to free schools meals compared to the nationals average of 13.5%. However, the range is from 84% to 6%.

To explore leadership approaches in these schools a research design was constructed that incorporated multiple methods. The prime aim of this approach was to capture 'thick descriptions' of leadership practice (Denzin, 1979). Initially, a review of the literature relating to schools facing challenging circumstances was undertaken in order to generate propositions and hypotheses for testing. In depth case study data was subsequently collected from ten schools facing challenging circumstances (Yin, 1989). This included semi-structured interviews with headteachers, middle managers and classroom teachers. In addition, a wide range of documentary and contextual data was collected at each school. The research study consisted of three phases. Phase one involved the literature review and generation of research questions and propositions. Phase two involved the data collection, within-case analysis and initial reporting. Phase 3 incorporated between-case analysis and the testing of initial findings with headteachers from a group of SFCC not involved in the study[3].

The selection of case study schools was informed by two factors. Firstly, care was taken to ensure that the schools represented a wide range of contexts and were geographically spread. Secondly, inspection reports and performance data were scrutinised to ensure that there was evidence of successful leadership and an upward school improvement trajectoryUsing this evidential base judgements were made about 'effective leadership'. The final sample of ten schools included:

- Schools located within a range of socio-economic and cultural situations (inner city, urban, rural and those with predominantly one ethnic group and also mixed and multiethnic groups).
- Schools that were demonstrating improvement i.e. there was evidence of improvement in performance

In the early stages of the research clear sets of ethical and practical guidelines were agreed with participants. Over fifty interviews were conducted and these were fully transcribed. Transcripts were returned to the interviewees for correction and validation purposes. The extent of the interview data enabled in-depth, cross-case comparisons to be undertaken (Woods, 1996). This analysis led to the emergence of a number of common themes and key findings. These are outlined in the next section.

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[3] National College for School Leadership Seminar, October 2001.

MAIN FINDINGS

Within a study comprising of only ten schools the possibilities for generalisation are inevitably limited. However, the volume and range of data collected in this study provided a basis for some preliminary findings about leadership in SFCC to be drawn. The study aimed to explore how far leaders in SFCC shared similar approaches to leadership and the extent to which the particular demands of the school context shaped or influenced their leadership style. Research has shown that authoritarian forms of leadership are most prevalent in schools in special measures or serious weakness, particularly in the early stages (Gray, 2000). In a failing school context, immediate action is required and hence, leadership approaches are often very directive and task focused. However, in schools that are not in either of the failing categories but are steadily improving, the potential for alternative leadership styles and leadership approaches clearly exist.

The evidence collected within the study suggests that headteachers adopt leadership approaches that match the particular stage of a school's development. While the heads acknowledged that they had all ar' pted autocratic leadership approaches at critical times they also agreed that this leadership approach was least likely to lead to sustained school improvement. The heads in the study had deliberately chosen a form of leadership to move the school forward that empowered others to lead and distributed leadership activity throughout the school. This 'teacher leadership' in many ways covers a similar terrain to transformational leadership, both its orientation and aspiration (Leithwood et al, 2000). However, the particular emphasis given by the heads to distributing leadership and empowering others would suggest an approach to leadership that has democratic rather than transformational principles at its core.

In all ten schools the research found that various forms of teacher leadership prevailed and that this directly influenced collective problem solving and decision-making. While headteachers' responses to problems varied, depending on the circumstance or situation, their value position remained consistently one of empowering pupils, staff and parents. The findings from the research study suggest that leadership in SFCC is defined by an individual value system that embraces equity, empowerment and moral purpose. The study revealed a complex but

compelling picture of leadership in SFCC. It reflected a form of leadership that is democratic and centrally concerned with giving others the responsibility to lead.

- **Vision and Values**

Of central importance within schools that are improving is an alignment to a shared set of values. The heads in the study communicated their personal vision and belief systems by direction, words and deeds. Through a variety of symbolic gestures and action they were successful at realigning both staff and pupils to their particular vision of the school. The heads in the study did 'walk the talk' through the consistency and integrity of their actions, they modelled behaviour that they considered desirable to achieve the school goals. They shared a belief and had an optimism that people have untapped potential for growth and development. The heads clearly respected others and modelled teacher leadership through empowering and encouraging others. They also trusted others and required trust from others. They recognised the need to be actively supportive, caring and encouraging as well as challenging and confrontational when necessary. A consistent and shared vision was an inherent part of their leadership approach. This helped them to communicate a sense of direction for the school. As Bhindi and Duigan (1996) suggest:

> *Authentic leaders breathe the life force into the workplace and keep the people feeling energised and focused. As stewards and guides they build people and their self-esteem. They derive their credibility from personal integrity and 'walking' their values.* (p29)

The headteachers communicated their vision through relationships with staff and students and they built these around core values. The vision and practices of these heads were organised around personal values such as the modelling and promotion of respect for individuals, fairness and equality, caring for the well being and whole development of students and staff, integrity and honesty. It was evident that their leadership values and visions were primarily moral i.e. dedicated to the welfare of staff and students, with the latter at the centre. These values underpinned their relationships with staff, students, parents and governors and guided their day to day actions. The heads in the study did display people-centred leadership in their day to day dealings with individuals. Their behaviour with others was premised upon respect and trust and their belief in developing the potential of staff and students.

The head's main aim is to allow others to flourish and grow, whether staff or students, it doesn't matter. The aim is to develop others and to generate self belief and self esteem in those that currently lack it (Teacher S 9)

People are your greatest asset and I firmly believe therefore that the staff and the students in this school are my best resource for change (Head S4)

Their ability to invite others to share and develop their vision was frequently commented upon by staff and students alike. Alongside these qualities however, were examples of heads being firm (in relation to values, expectations and standards), and, on occasion, ruthless. In many respects, the way they interacted with others was the common denominator of their success. The human qualities they possessed enabled them to lead others effectively and to establish confidence in others that their vision was worth sharing.

The heads were quick to dispel the 'cultural deficit' notion often prevalent in many SFCC and were committed to the belief that every child can learn and succeed. They made decisions that motivated both staff and students and placed an emphasis upon student achievement and learning. The heads in the study talked about 'creating the conditions that would lead to higher student performance' and they were deeply concerned about the welfare and the educational experiences of minority children. They set high expectations for students, provided clear rules about behaviour and stressed discipline. Their approach was one of empowerment through caring and through generating a culture within the school where all students were motivated to succeed.

- **Distributing Leadership**

The heads in this study adopted highly creative approaches to tackling the complex demands of implementing multiple change. The decision to work with and through teams as well as individuals was a common response to the management of change. The heads used a number of strategies for bringing out the best in staff. In addition to formal development opportunities,

these strategies included: the power of praise; involving others in decision making and giving professional autonomy. Although the heads tended to concentrate on teaching staff in the first instance, they used similar approaches when dealing with governors, parents and to some extent, students. All the heads invested in others in order to lead the school. From the perspectives of others the overarching message was one of the head building the community of the school in its widest sense i.e. through developing and involving others.

When I first came to the school, the head and SMT were considered to be the leaders, everyone else opted out. With the formulation of teams with clear targets I've been able to distribute leadership and to energise teachers to take responsibility for change and development (Head S7)

The head has given real leadership responsibilities to others. It's not a case of just delegating headship tasks.(Teacher S 3)

The middle managers now have greater responsibility and authority for leading. The days of being in charge of stock cupboards are over (SMT S 10)

Heads in the study and their constituencies consistently highlighted the importance of possessing a range of leadership strategies to address the diverse sets of issues and problems they faced. They also emphasised the contingent nature of many of the decisions they made and how different leadership strategies would be used in different contexts. The majority of schools in the study had at some stage emerged from the special measures or serious weaknesses. Therefore, staff in each school had considerable experience of OfSTED and HMI inspection. The heads commented upon the importance of careful planning for the inspection. All the heads acknowledged that they adopted a more autocratic leadership style during the pre-inspection phase. This included paying special attention to issues such as policy implementation and consistent standards of teaching (Chapman, 2002). During the inspection the heads adopted a more supportive leadership style in order to assist staff through the process. Leaders in SFCC took this role very seriously and consciously demonstrated high levels of emotional responsibility towards their staff during the inspection period. An important contributory factor to achieving a positive outcome was considered to be how the heads leadership style matched the situation or circumstance facing the school at different times.

It's a learning curve all the time. I think leadership styles have to match the needs of that school at that particular point in time. (Head S 2)

The head displays a range of leadership styles really, much depends on the situation or circumstance (Teacher S 4)

I don't think there is one leadership style or approach is there? Anymore than there is a single teaching style. You need breadth and diversity in both (SMT S 5)

In particular the heads in this study emphasised that while they had a broad set of values they adhered to they did not consider this to be a fixed leadership approach. They felt strongly that they could switch to a leadership style that suited the situation and could behave in ways that did not reflect their core beliefs, if necessary.

- **Investing in Staff Development**

A principal concern for heads in this study was one of maintaining staff morale and motivation. In a number of the schools staff morale had been low and individual self-esteem had been eroded by successive criticism of the school. Consequently, the heads consistently and vigorously promoted staff development whether through in-service training, visits to other schools, or peer support schemes. It was noticeable, also, that such development did not only focus upon needs which were of direct benefit to the school but also those which were of direct benefit to the individual. The development needs of non-teaching staff were also included. The emphasis heads placed on the continuing development of their staff was an endorsement that teachers were their most important asset and that, particularly in difficult times, it was important to maintain their own sense of self-worth by valuing them:

Teachers in this school have had their morale eroded and chipped away by successive OfSTEDs. It is important to invest in them and their capabilities, to raise morale and to foster 'can do' culture. (Head School 6).

If you are constantly told you are failing, you believe it. You are a failed teacher (Teacher S 7)

The emphasis placed on the continuing development of their staff reflected the recognition among heads that the teachers were their most important resource. Consequently, they were highly skilled at using a combination of pressure and support to promote the efforts of teachers, particularly when working with the most difficult students. They encouraged teachers to take risks and rewarded innovative thinking.

The heads set high standards for teaching and teacher performance. The focus and emphasis upon improving teaching and learning was common across all case study schools. Time was provided to ensure that teachers met to discuss teaching and were able to observe each other teaching. In addition, teaching performance was monitored and individual assessments made. Poor teaching was not ignored or tolerated within the schools. Where it did exist, it was challenged and strategies were agreed for improvement. Where this did not occur, the necessary steps were taken by the headteacher to deal with the problem. In the majority of cases, a combination of structured support, monitoring and an individual development programme addressed the problem of poor quality teaching. For these heads, effective leadership was about capacity building in others and investing in the social capital of the school.

- **Relationships**

The heads in this study were good at developing and maintaining relationships. They were considered to be fair and were seen as having a genuine joy and vibrancy when talking to students. They generated a high level of commitment in others through their openness, honest and the quality of their inter-personal relationships. The heads engaged in self-criticism and were able to admit to others when they felt they had made a mistake. They placed a particular emphasis upon generating positive relationships with parents and fostering a view of the school as being part of rather than apart from the community.

It is important that staff and students are involved in the life of the school and relate to each other in a positive way (Head S 1)

The head has ensured that we work more in teams and work across our subject areas. This has made us build broader relationships and work together (Teacher S 8)

Stoll and Fink (1996) describe 'invitational leadership' as a form of leadership where leaders place a high premium upon personal values and inter-relationships with others. Heads in the study did reflect many of the dimensions of invitational leadership. They placed an emphasis upon people rather than systems and invited others to lead. It was clear that while they possessed a range of leadership strategies to address the diverse sets of issues and problems they faced, at the core of their leadership practice was a belief in empowering others.

Ultimately, the job of the leader is to give others the confidence and capability to take on new responsibilities. It's really about giving power to others rather than keeping it at the top (Head 10)

In many respects we have more power than before. We are involved in decision making, we are able to take ideas forward and to challenge new ideas and developments. I guess we are more involved, more part of the decision making process than before (Teacher S 6)

The head has deliberately devolved leadership to others. I was concerned at first that this would mean we would lose control over the management of the school but it has generated much more interest from the staff in being involved in decisions. There is less apathy and less resistance to change (SMT S 5)

While the heads emphasised the contingent nature of many of the decisions they made and how different leadership strategies would be used in different contexts, the central belief in distributing leadership to teachers remained unaltered. This form of leadership starts not from the basis of power and control but from the ability to act with others and to enable others to act. It places an emphasis upon allowing and empowering those who are not in positions or responsibility or authority to lead.

- **Community Building**

A distinctive feature of schools that are improving is how far they work as *a professional learning community*. Within the schools in the study a climate of collaboration existed and there was a commitment to work together. However, this climate was the result of lengthy discussion, development and dialogue amongst those working within and outside the school. It was

deliberately orchestrated through the provision of opportunities to build social trust. This included providing opportunities for dialogue between staff and parents.

The heads in the study emphasised the need to establish an *'interconnectedness of home, school and community'*. This involved communicating and understanding the needs of the community, to establish a dialogue with parents and to connect with the formal and informal community leaders. The headteachers in the study visited homes, attended community events, communicated regularly with the public about successes and engendered trust by showing care for young people. They understood the forces within the community that impeded learning, they were aware of the negative forces of the dominant culture and they listened to parents' views and opinions regularly. The heads tried to create integral relationships with the families in the communities they served. They recognised that 'family, school and community relationships directly affect student outcomes' hence the need to connect with the community was of paramount importance to the success of the school.

The first thing I recognised that needed to be done was to get the parents into the school, so we screened world cup games on parents' evenings (Head S 10)

This school is located on the edge of a large predominantly white, working class estate. There is long term unemployment, low aspirations, high levels of crime and drug abuse. The biggest problem we had was getting the community to see us as a resource rather than the enemy (SMT S 3).

Within the various schools in the study there was a strong and clear commitment to academic achievement and this was regularly communicated to parents. This academic capital was developed through a commitment to the success of all pupils and a shared belief in rewarding and praising pupils. Sergiovanni (1998) points out that within schools professional capital is created as a fabric of reciprocal responsibilities and mutual support. The heads in this study involved others in decision making and had professional trust in them. They cultivated professional dialogue between teachers, placing a high premium upon their own professional development and the professional development of their staff. In this respect, they developed professional and intellectual capital by encouraging their schools to become inquiring communities

Another important dimension of successful leadership in SFCC is the power of context. The heads in the study were highly responsive to the demands and challenges within and beyond their own school context. In managing people and cultural change they managed external as well as internal environments. They had skills in communicating, in supporting colleagues' development so that they felt confident in fulfilling expectations of their contribution to the achievement of strategic goals and in the management of conflict and negotiating positive outcomes. In this sense, they were 'adaptive' and through these processes were able to manage conflict in a way that achieved positive outcomes.

Commentary

These research findings highlight the intensity and complexity of the leadership role in SFCC. All the heads shared high expectations and a determination to achieve the highest possible standards. They placed a high premium upon personal values and focused upon cultural rather than structural change. As Day et al (2000) note in *rapidly changing times, technical-rational approaches to leadership may be beguilingly attractive, yet in reality are unlikely to result in improved schooling unless accompanied by both a professional and moral dimension*. It was clear from this study that the heads in these schools did not operate from a predominantly technical-rational position. They had a high degree of emotional intelligence and that they were acutely aware of the need to build positive relationships with pupils, teachers and parents. They did this primarily through a process of empowerment and trust, engaging pupils, parents and teachers in decision making.

In summary the research found that:

- effective leaders in SFCC are constantly managing tensions and problems directly related to the particular circumstances and context of the school. The main leadership task facing them is one of coping with unpredictability, conflict and dissent on a daily basis without discarding core values.

- effective leaders in SFCC are, above all, people-centred. The leadership practice of headteachers in this study was underpinned by a set of personal and professional values that placed human needs before organisational needs.

- effective leaders in SFCC distribute leadership to others and invest in various forms of teacher leadership;

- effective leaders in SFCC are able to combine a moral purpose with a willingness to be collaborative and to promote collaboration amongst colleagues, whether through teamwork, or extending the boundaries of participation in leadership and decision making.

The most important aspect of leadership for all the heads in the study concerned establishing the kinds of relationships in which their leadership could be best expressed. Being a head in a SFCC was clearly not a 'desk job but rather it was about displaying people-centred qualities and skills. Taking this perspective, leadership is a fluid and emergent rather than as a fixed phenomenon. It implies a different power relationship within the school where the distinctions between followers and leaders tend to blur. It has implications for the division of labour within a school, particularly when the tasks facing the organisation are shared more widely. It also opens up the possibility for all teachers to become leaders at various times. It implies a redistribution of power and a re-alignment of authority within the school as an organisation. It suggests that leadership is a shared and collective endeavour that engages all teachers within the school (Lambert, 1998). It also implies that the context in which people work and learn together is where they construct and refine meaning leading to a shared purpose or set of goals.

Silns and Mulford (2002) conclude that student outcomes are more likely to improve where leadership sources are distributed throughout the school community and where teachers are empowered in areas of importance to them. They argue that teachers cannot create and sustain the conditions for the productive development of children if those conditions do not exist for teachers (Silns and Mulford, 2002). Empowering teachers in this way and providing them with opportunities to lead is based on the simple but profound idea that if schools are to become better at providing learning for students then they must also become better at providing opportunities for teachers to innovate, develop and learn together.

To cope with the unprecedented rate of change in schools in the 21st century requires radically new and alternative approaches to school improvement and school leadership. If schools are to be real learning communities this cannot be achieved by operating with models of change and improvement dependent upon individual or singular leadership practices. The overarching message about leadership in SFCC is one of building the community of the school in its widest sense i.e. through developing and involving others. What characterised each of the heads in the study was their resilience, their sheer capacity for hard work and their continuing adherence, under the most challenging circumstances, to provide the best opportunities for the learning and achievement of pupils and staff. They were able to convince all those within the school and the community it served that their vision was worth sharing and pursuing. In all cases they had changed their schools for the better.

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